

Who Was Jaakoff Prelooker? Ken Thomson

Volume I no. 1 (1896) of this *Journal* (pp. vi and 47) records that, on 1 May 1894¹, Mr. Jaakoff Prelooker of Odessa was admitted as one of the first three Honorary Members of the Cairngorm Club on the summit of the Barmekin². No other details are vouchsafed therein, except the names of two other Honorary Members admitted at about the same time (though not necessarily at the same place), i.e., Sir William Cunliffe Bart. of Glentana (without the ‘r’, as was his insistence) and the Rev. William Forsyth, D.D., of Abernethy, Speyside (author of *In the Shadow of Cairngorm - Chronicles of the United Parishes of Abernethy and Kincardine*, 1900). Curiosity aroused, the present writer undertook a little research, with the results below. Much about Prelooker himself comes from an introduction, by Helena Frank³, to one of the man’s own books, *Russian Flashlights* (1911)⁴.

Yakov (or Iakov) M. Priluker, a Jew, was born in Pinsk in Western Russia (now Belarus), in 1860. His grandfather being a noted Rabbi, he was first educated in an ultra-strict Jewish seminary, learning the ancient Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Babylonian Talmud. Then, under an edict of the Russian government, he was sent in a group of such children to a Government School to learn Russian and a little arithmetic, geography and history. His parents removed him to another rabbinical seminary, but the young Jaakoff kept up his Russian in secret, and eventually managed to escape to another Government College, though again with strict discipline. There, he came across the New Testament, and started to

¹ The year is not clear in the *Journal*; the “Excursions and Notes” sections of the early *Journals* are notoriously skimpy with such essential information for later generations. Other evidence (see below) shows that the year was, in fact, 1893.

² Such a membership admission procedure seems to have been common Club practice at the time, and even Committee meetings were sometimes held on mountain summits - a practice which, if reinstated, might reduce their current duration! Interestingly, in *CCJ* Vol. IV (no. 24), Prelooker no longer appears as an Honorary Member, his name being replaced by John R. Findlay of Aberlour (either J. Ritchie Findlay who died in 1898 - the name is in italics, along with that of Sir William, who died in 1900 - or perhaps his son Sir John Findlay, for whom Aberlour House was a “northern home”; both were proprietors of *The Scotsman*).

³ Helena Frank was a British non-Jewess who studied Hebrew and Russian in order to translate Yiddish. Fearful of the survival of the language, she founded the Anglo-Jewish Yiddish Literary Society, and translated many works, including *Yiddish Tales*, and the poem *In the Factory* (with Rose Pastor Stokes, an American socialist activist, and latterly a Communist).

⁴ Downloadable from books.google.co.uk.



envisage a reconciliation of Jews and Christians - a view later enlarged to include Mohammedans, Buddhists and others.

In 1880, he graduated, and was appointed as an assistant master at the Second Government School for Jews in Odessa - then, as now, a major Black Sea port in the Ukraine. Here, he proselytised amongst more orthodox Jews, and through the local daily paper, whose Christian editor had been imprisoned and exiled several times for his liberal political views. An editorial in 1882, arguing against Jewish traditions such as physical circumcision, the Sabbath being on a Saturday, and a ban on Jewish-Christian marriage,

created great agitation and confusion, with some Jews believing that the Government was attempting forcible conversion. Prelooker's post was threatened, but he managed to avoid condemnation for heresy by the Crown Rabbi, and wrote a book (*Hebrew Reformers: New Israel and the Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood*) which the Russian Government in St. Petersburg - then notoriously anti-Semitic - looked on favourably as a way of fomenting further dissension amongst its Jewish population. Back in Odessa, however, Prelooker was still in hot water, declared a heretic by the Jewish Community Council but saved by sympathetic if autocratic officials.

Over the next few years, *Hebrew Reformers* gained many admirers, and Prelooker found fellow-thinkers amongst the Stundist and Molocan movements which were trying to break away from the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the "New Israel" movement⁵ which attracted him was

⁵ The "New Israel" religion arose in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its aim was to facilitate, by means of radical religious reforms conceived in the spirit of rationalism, contact between Jews and Christians, and thereby pave the way for civil emancipation. The twofold religio-social program of the sect was to recognize only the teachings of Moses, rejecting

now viewed suspiciously by the government, and Prelooker suffered much persecution, as related in his *Experiences of a Russian Reformer*. He decided that he would not last much longer in Odessa (or perhaps Siberia), and decide to emigrate to England, where he arrived in 1891 with only two pounds in his pocket (the remnants of a gift from a friendly Berlin professor), and letters of recommendation from the English Church in Odessa. Despite this unpromising start (he was not, of course, the only Russian refugee in London), he soon established a reputation for speaking and writing (his flair for languages was astounding; he wrote in Russian, Yiddish, German and French, as well as English), and he was gave lectures in various parts of Britain, as well as on the continent.

In subsequent years, he gave talks, often in Edinburgh and elsewhere in Scotland at the invitation of reform-minded church leaders, on a variety of topics, including *The Position of Women in the Five Great Religions*. Some of these events were in and around Aberdeen, where Professor Charles Stewart was President of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, and it must have been this visit that brought him to the attention of the Cairngorm Club. As recorded in successive April and May 1893 issues of the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*⁶ (which in fact seems to have been a daily), Prelooker lectured - sometimes with "oxy-hydrogen slides" - over about ten days in several churches, as well as in the Albert Hall, Huntly Street. He dealt with several subjects, including *Russian Life, Religion and Politics*, and the writings of Count Tolstoy (then a novelty).

both the typical Russian Orthodox view of Mystery in God, and the Jewish Talmud, dietary laws, circumcision rites, and traditional form of worship. The day of rest was transferred from Saturday to Sunday; the Russian language was declared to be the "native" tongue of the Jews and made obligatory in every-day life, and usury and similar distasteful pursuits were forbidden. In 1891, Vasilij Semionovitch Lubkov took control of the New Israel movement, declaring himself to be the living God. In 1905, the church moved its centre of operations to Rostov-on-Don, and later spread its influence over the south of Russia. In 1913, about 2,000 followers under Lubkov's leadership migrated to Uruguay and established a farming town with very restrictive rules. He confiscated all the possessions of his followers and turned them into essentially one family. At the end of the 1920's, Lubkov moved with a few families to Manich in the Soviet Union, where, although persecuted, the cult survived until the 1950s. In 1972, the Uruguay government repressed San Javier by destroying the library.

⁶ Scanning these pages - as can easily be done online at Aberdeen City Libraries - reveals further items of some fascination, especially in the advertisements, e.g. for Cockle's Antibilious Pills, and full sets of teeth at one guinea each. Another article records the imprisonment (for destroying documents) of the Dowager Duchess of Sutherland as a "first-class misdemeanant" in Holloway Gaol; she was accused in Parliament of having had "a special apartment luxuriously fitted up in plush, with carpets, curtains, cushions, mirrors, and flowers", permission to be attended by her own maids and medical attendants, "her meals sumptuously provided", and eight boxes of personal luggage.

In the same paper, the Club's meet to the Barmekin is recorded in some six inches of closely typed newspaper column⁷, and took in Dunecht House, Culfossie, the Balcarres Inn at Echt, and thence by alternative lowland and upland routes to Midmar Castle, where members were invited in for tea. On the summit of the Barmekin, Prelooker - apparently the only Honorary Member actually present on the occasion - is recorded as commending the "physical, moral and intellectual advantages of mountaineering", and wondering if the "Russian character was probably modified by the generally flat nature of [that] country".

Prelooker took his propaganda to anywhere that people would listen, including the Ascot races, and eventually became the founding Secretary of the Russian Reformation Society, dedicated to better mutual understanding between Great Britain and Russia⁸, and encouraging reformers in the latter country. Prelooker's book *Under the Czar and Queen Victoria: the Experiences of a Russian Reformer* was a success, and in 1897 there appeared - with an opening quotation from Tennyson - the first issue of the monthly *The Anglo-Russian*, which lasted until 1914. He organised a Russian choir, and a Russian Exhibition in several towns on the south coast of England, and gave lectures all over Great Britain, including Aberdeen - where "after the lecture they paid him more than the fee agreed upon"!

Not all Prelooker's initiatives were successful. He had opponents who defended the Russian Empire, and reacted badly to this early ecumenism.⁹ A "Ruscan" press agency, launched partly to counter Russian

⁷ Probably by Alexander Inkson McConnachie, the Club's indefatigable first Secretary and *Journal* Editor. The paper also records the busy activity on the Aberdeen railways on 1 May, which coincided with a newfangled Bank Holiday, and its many train excursions. The Ancient Order of Shepherds needed two trains from Aberdeen to Nairn and Inverness; the Club is not alone in seeing changing transport demands for their excursions!

⁸ At that time, British perceptions of Russia were coloured by memories of the Crimean War, suspicions of 'The Great Game' in the Himalayas, and anxiety over anarchism in Europe and elsewhere.

⁹ One of his opponents was William Thomas Stead, a fervent sexual moralist (though a supporter of women's rights, and an anti-war crusader) and campaigner for the Tsar. After two years of formal schooling, and editorship of the *Darlington Echo* at 20, Stead moved to the tabloid-like *Pall Mall Gazette*, in which role he set up - rather incompetently - the procurement of a young girl in order to highlight Victorian hypocrisy. He was sent to jail for three months, and, though in prison uniform for only a day, thereafter went to work by London commuter train every 10th November in his arrowed suit. Amongst other achievements, he caught and cooked office mice in order to understand the experiences of the besieged residents of Paris in 1871, conducted the first-ever interviews with the Tsar, and oversaw the building of the Peace Palace in The Hague. However, he did not survive the Titanic in 1912.

encroachments on Finland¹⁰ and perhaps other Scandinavian countries, did not last long, and the Boer War scuppered a Russian language school set up in London with the hope of teaching army officers. During the First World War, he was not afraid to associate himself with unpopular causes, as can be seen from an entry by Daisy Parsons, the first woman Mayor of West Ham, in the *Worker's Dreadnought* of May 1917: "A splendid lantern lecture, with music, on Russia by Jaakoff Prelooker will be held in Lee's Hall May 14th 7.30 pm".

A notable aspect of Prelooker's work, and *The Anglo-Russian*, was devotion to the cause of women's rights, including suffrage. He gave many lectures on this theme despite the risks of alienating potential audiences, and was greatly assisted by Mrs Frances Swiney, wife of an Anglo-Indian major-general, President of the Women's Suffrage Society of Cheltenham, author of *The Awakening of Woman*, and a regular columnist in *The Anglo-Russian*. But Prelooker was not simply a speaker and editor in this field. Having married an Englishwoman (Ethel Thorpe, who bore him two daughters) in 1905, but remaining himself a Russian and therefore without a vote (like his wife), he objected to paying taxes and rates, until the Horsham Petty Sessions Court issued a distress warrant. Only the widespread interest in his case eventually persuaded him to give in. In 1909, he became a naturalised British citizen.

Prelooker published in Russian, German and (excellent) English; the British Library catalogue lists 23 works against his name. His best-known works are perhaps *The New Israelite; or, Rabbi Shalom on the Shores of the Black Sea*¹¹ (a thinly disguised account of the 'conversion' of his grandfather), *Heroes and Heroines of Russia: True and Thrilling Revolution Stories*, and his pamphlet *To My Persecutors*. A good account of the body of Anglo-Russian literature at this time, and its influence on shaping British opinion in time for the 1905 Russian Revolution (during which several thousands died, to little avail) is given by Peaker¹².

Prelooker died in Hastings on October 24th 1935, leaving a bequest to the British Association for the Advancement of Science. His obituary in *The Times* the next day recorded some of the above facts of his life, and added that in 1913 he had been Vice-President of the Anglo-Ottoman Society, and in 1916-17 President of the Société Internationale de Philogie, Sciences et Beaux Arts.

¹⁰ Then an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire, until the Finnish Declaration of Independence in 1917.

¹¹ Aberdeen University Special Collections has a copy of this volume.

¹² Carol Peaker (2006) 'We are not Barbarians: Literature and the Russian Émigré Press in England, 1890-1905' in *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 3. See www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/451/311.

The question remains: why was Prelooker was given honorary membership of the Cairngorm Club? It seems unlikely that mountaineering prowess was the reason, and there is no-one left alive to throw personal light on the matter¹³. Away from the Carpathians in the far west, the Ukraine is a singularly flat country apart from the 2,000ft. Heights of Sevastopol in the Crimea (where rock-climbing is now advertised). In the nineteenth century, mountaineering had hardly got going in Russia, if one excepts imperialist explorations in the Caucasus in Georgia and the Pamirs in Afghanistan. None of the accounts of Prelooker's time in Britain mentions hillwalking, or even sport of any kind. Thus a Club mystery remains unsolved, at least for now. But it has been fun trying, and exploring the corries, lochans and ridges of the objective, even if the summit has not been reached.

¹³ Nevertheless, *CCJI*(1) p. 46 records that, at around the same time as Prelooker, one Ranald R. Macdonald was admitted as a new Club member. He was the father of Ranald Jnr, who in 1954 introduced to the Club one Eric Johnston - now a very senior Honorary member (M Sec 56-67, Sec 67-72, VP 66-67, 76-77, Aud 78-82, Pres 82-85, Hon Pres 94-03)!